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ABSTRACT

The American Philosopher Henry David Thoreau provides modern students an important perspective on the state and operation of democratic institutions and society. Many critics of his philosophy cite the author's inability to live up to his articulated tenets as grounds to dismiss the exhortative writings as idealistic and implausible. This essay examines Thoreau's writings from the perspective of a rhetorical educator; showing how Thoreau was acutely aware of his "rhetorical voice" and his image as a "shining example" of Transcendentalism for citizens to follow. Communication teachers might employ Thoreau's writings as both an embodiment of civil disobedience and an example of the power of discourse in building a social ideal upon which to base our educational vision. Contains a 15-item selected bibliography and 23 notes. (Author/RS)

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Henry David Thoreau: American Transcendentalism and The Implications for Rhetoric in American Civic Education

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Abstract: The American Philosopher Henry David Thoreau provides modern students an important perspective on the state and operation of democratic institutions and society. Many critics of his philosophy cite the author's inability to live up to his articulated tenets as grounds to dismiss the exhortative writings as idealistic and implausible. In this essay, I examine Thoreau's writings from the perspective of a rhetorical educator; showing how Thoreau was acutely aware of his "rhetorical voice" and his image as a "shining example" of Transcendentalism for citizens to follow. Communication teachers might employ Thoreau's writings as both an embodiment of civil disobedience and an example of the power of discourse in building a social ideal upon which to base our educational vision.

> Nature and human life are as various as our several constitutions. Who shall say what prospect life offers to another? Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant? We should live in all the ages of the world in an hour; aye, in all the worlds of the ages. History, Poetry, Mythology! – I know of no reading of another's experience so startling and informing as this would be.[1]

The American philosopher Henry David Thoreau presents a challenging, sometimes contradictory, sometimes mystifying, yet consistently illuminating subject for rhetorical examination. He stands as an American version of the Socratic gadfly, exhorting his fellow citizens to re-vitalize what he saw as a flawed government and a declining quality of life through deliberate, civil disobedience. Some have raised the question as to whether or not Thoreau himself serves as an exemplar of the life he idealizes; and whether the fact that he was unable to subscribe to the tenets of his own philosophy renders his ideas less valid. From the philosophical and perhaps the ethical perspective, this paradox can be troublesome. From the pedagogical perspective, however, this inconsistency may be discounted as editorial attention. That his writings present ideas from a consistent perspective, whether from real experiences or from those hypothesized as a "shining example,"[2] is what makes them compelling as a pedagogical referent. In short, that Thoreau himself could not live as he proposed does not lessen the social impact of his rhetorical image. This paper will examine the implications for rhetoric in a democratic society

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[1]Thoreau (1986), 52-53.

[2]Michael Meyer notes that Margaret Fuller's *Women of the Nineteenth Century*, with its exhortation to individual spirit, was published in February of the same year Thoreau moved to Walden pond.

found in the writings of Thoreau, especially *Civil Disobedience*. Importantly, the implications here are pedagogical and theoretical, rather than moral in nature. By conducting the examination in this way, I hope to locate this project in the valid space of pursuing the social ideal, attending especially how the language Thoreau used is voluntary, deliberate, or speculative, and ultimately credible.

Thoreau was one of the thinkers often associated with the Transcendentalist movement, and his ideas are consistent with the more commonly held tenets of that perspective. He always actively resisted efforts to label his work, however, and biographer Michael Meyer writes that he may well have called himself a "Transcendentalist" because such a characterization would surely "confuse and dismay" people. The Transcendentalist movement, a minor historical movement in terms of the numbers of people credited as proponents and their influence at the time, impacted the American democracy in very subtle yet deeply rooted ways. Thoreau's selective acceptance of their ideas gives readers a clearer picture of his own thoughts. Thoreau shared with Emerson, as one example, the belief that each succeeding generation must discover the world anew, through their own unique perspective, rather than solely through the experiences of history.[3] The student must know historical accounts to learn of previous experiences, but must learn to think critically about this history and its implications. One of the transcendentalist tenets not shared by Thoreau was the social, utopian ideal of many proponents, including Fuller and Emerson, and his self-imposed solitude at Walden is certainly in part a response to the communal and utopian

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[3]Emerson's *Self-Reliance* stands as his articulated position on the un-reliability of a purely historically-rooted perspective. There, he argues that to use historical reference as evidence for informed deliberation is clearly important, but to rely of the applicability of historical precedent to make public policy is dogmatic, closed-minded, and oppressive.

exhortations of the movement.

Thoreau was not so concerned with social reform as were many other transcendentalists. Indeed, he had so little patience for social reformers that he wrote in *Walden* that "If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life." Meyer writes, "In Thoreau's mind, individual discipline, intellectual growth, and spiritual development were the only true methods of reform, methods that required neither conventions, membership lists, nor contributions. True reform was interior, private, and wholly individual. Reforming one's self meant discovering the divinity within one's self."[4]

Thoreau sought individual liberation from the banalities of society. He always publicly asserted that the material progress of American society served as the greatest obstacle to the individual's spiritual evolution. However, because there is evidence that the public posture of Thoreau was often in conflict with his real emotions, the question must be asked as to whom his philosophy was directed? While it is true that he left society, at least symbolically, to live in solitude at Walden pond, his personal correspondence with his family often reflected a loneliness that stood in contrast to the character expressing his philosophical solitude. Describing an unnamed Thoreau in his essay *The Transcendentalist*, Emerson writes:

> Many intelligent and religious persons withdrew themselves from the common labors and competitions of the market and the caucus, and betake themselves to a certain solidarity and critical way of living, from which no solid fruit has yet appeared to justify their separation. They hold themselves aloof: they feel the disproportion between their faculties and the work offered them, and they prefer to ramble in the country and perish of ennui, to the degradation of such charities and such ambitions as the city can propose to them. They are striking work, and

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[4]Meyer (1986), 13.

crying out for somewhat worthy to do![5]

Thoreau is a writer aware of his rhetorical voice, and the need to reinforce the image that fosters it. Emerson could not identify the "fruit" of Thoreau's self-imposed exile, yet quite apparently Thoreau perceived such "fruit" in his example, or at least the literary image of his example. Additionally, because the hypothetical example is clearly more connotatively powerful to those not familiar with Thoreau's real life, the inconsistency becomes effective as a tool to teach democratic skepticism.

There are many indications to be found as to what sort of image Thoreau was attempting to build, and thus what sort of example he wished - rhetorically speaking - to set. Not only does his personal life seem to indicate an internal conflict between man and philosophy, but the language of his philosophy paradoxically displays explicit contempt for and an acute awareness and skillful employment of rhetorical device. Clearly, Thoreau believed in the power of language. Clear as well, is the inference that he was quite deliberate with his choice of words. Meyer writes:

> The unabashed announcement on the first page of *Walden* that Thoreau is writing about himself should not prevent his readers from recognizing that, despite all those first-person singular pronouns, his purpose is to reveal more about the reader than himself. His "simple and sincere account of his own life" is less genuinely autobiographical than it is an image of Transcendental individualism carefully posed, cropped, and retouched.[6]

That Thoreau's philosophy ought to be studied for its unique insight into the early 19th century American Transcendental perspective in unquestionable. That Thoreau is a literary stylist gifted with the rare ability to transform the mundane existence of his often squatter's experiences

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[5]Emerson (1982), 246-247.

[6]Meyer (1986), 24.

into a rich and vivid account of one man's appreciation of the rhythms and patterns of nature is also without doubt. What has yet to be examined, however, is how Thoreau's employment of rhetorical device, especially in light of the personal paradoxes that plainly separate man from philosophy, yields new testimony toward the question of how the Transcendental perspective could be made relevant to students in the modern American democracy. If Thoreau himself is neither able nor willing to live as he would prescribe, then how does that failure influence the legitimacy of his philosophy as a functioning pedagogical referent? While an individual's life certainly must be considered when examining philosophical musings, consistent embodiment of those values is not the only characteristic that validates a social philosophy as a pedagogical tool. Thoreau himself seems willing to concede that the standards he sets for his audience are difficult to achieve. "In the long run," he writes in *Walden*, "men only hit what they aim at. Therefore, though they should fail immediately, they had better aim at something high."[7] Thoreau's use of this ideal image as a rhetorical, exhortatory device, lends a specific pedagogical utility to Transcendentalism in its criticism of the American experiment in democracy.

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> Seen from a lower point of view, the Constitution, with all its faults, is very good; the law and the courts are very respectable; even this state and this American government are, in many respects, very admirable and rare things, to be thankful for, such as a great many have described them; but seen from a point of view a little higher, they are what I have described them; seen from a higher still, and the

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[7]Thoreau (1986), 69.

> highest, who shall say what they are, or that they are worth looking at or thinking of at all?[8]

There are any number of ways one might examine the inherent contradictions that dominate the life and philosophy of Henry Thoreau. There can be no doubt that the choices of his life could only have been made in a democratic society. His writings, however ironic or satirical, seem to indicate at best an impatience, and at worst a disdain, for the society that made his lifestyle a possibility. Importantly however, his most biting criticism is reserved not for the social conditions of the democracy, but for the exacting pressures of capitalism and the demands of social class and economic status.

Emerson described the transcendentalist as one who "wishes that the spiritual principle should be suffered to demonstrate itself to the end, in all possible applications to the state of man, without the admission of anything unspiritual; that is, anything positive, dogmatic, personal."[9] It is clear that Emerson, whether or not he agreed with the lifestyle of Thoreau, nevertheless retained some amount of respect for his friend's resolve. This is a useful perspective for readers of Thoreau, in that the contradiction between some events in Thoreau's life and the image as portrayed in his writings may be discounted as an ingredient toward the rhetorical project. In fact, a compelling pedagogical referent emerges at the level of the "shining example." Thoreau created, through his rhetorical voice, this "shining example" for his readers. His neighbors in Concorde, the unwilling targets of his sardonic wit, saw no such example, widely thinking of him as lazy and careless. He was remembered more for, in one case, burning down hundreds of acres

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[8]Thoreau (1986), 409.

[9]Emerson (1982), 243.

of prime timber without making any attempt at honorable restitution, rather than as some insightful social critic. The characteristic employed most often by Thoreau to describe himself was "deliberate." His life of reflection and introspection was meant to give him a clear sense into what was most necessary for spiritual wholeness. Toward that articulated goal, he lived "deliberately." This is in contrast to the "desperation" he saw in the lives of other men. He writes that;

> But men labor under a mistake. The better part of the man is soon ploughed into the soil for compost. By a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, they are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal. It is a fool's life, as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before.[10]

One of the features which makes *Civil Disobedience* so important to the student of Thoreau is the shift in perspective from this sense of individualism to a perspective on community. He almost seems to attribute this "fool's life" to the misguided social norms as perpetuated by public policy and government.

> Governments show how successfully men can be imposed upon, even impose on themselves, for their own advantage. It is excellent, we must all allow. Yet this government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way. *It* does not keep the country free. *It* does not settle the west. *It* does not educate. The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way.[11]

Under the stress of capitalist culture, and burdened by the quest for material status and the reality of having to cooperate with other people who have different ambitions, men lead what

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[10]Thoreau (1986), 47-48. The "old book" referred to here is the Bible. Thoreau wrote that even the mythical labors of Hercules were preferable to the forced labors of the common man, as they were at least specific and finite in nature.

[11]Ibid., 386.

Thoreau sees as a detached and desperate existence, not in control of their destiny, and blind to their predicament. "The mass of men," he writes, "lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats."[12]

Thus we raise the question of what social classes Thoreau would allow in his society, or indeed what sort of economic condition might prevail. In the democracy perceived and criticized by Thoreau, the society and not the individual sets the social agenda. The society establishes social and economic currencies by which individuals operate. The individual must participate in order to gain social status. But the Transcendentalist, writes Thoreau, does not respect monetary currency and its crude valuation of material means.

> Absolutely speaking, the more money, the less virtue; for money comes between a man and his objects, and obtains them for him; and it was certainly no great virtue to obtain it. It puts to rest many questions which he would otherwise be taxed to answer; while to only new question which it puts is the hard but superfluous one, how to spend it. Thus his moral ground is taken from under his feet.[13]

Notably, Thoreau immediately begins a deliberate connotative assault upon what might be called frivolous labor. There is never a time when he explicitly dismisses the United States; but here, as he also does in other works with regard to slavery, he strongly implies his dissatisfaction with American society as consequences of and consistent with the pressures of capitalist economics.

> Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them. Their fingers, from excessive

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[12]Ibid., 50.

[13]Thoreau (1986), 399-400.

> toil, are too clumsy and tremble too much for that. Actually, the laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day; he cannot afford to sustain the manliest relations to men; his labor would be depreciated in the market. He has no time to be anything but a machine.[14]

Thoreau blames capitalistic values for turning men's priorities toward material goals. While the individuals are responsible for what they attend, the hegemonic presence of capitalism is primary to the "ignorance and mistake" of the citizens. So what goals would he place above them? What ought the function of the citizen be? And thus, what sort of education system would Thoreau envision to educate citizens that they might lead deliberate lives? This becomes the primary question to establish any pedagogic referent; the answer to which yields Thoreau's vision of "good citizen," and thus what he would contribute to the education of them.

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> From the cave we have advanced to roofs of palm leaves, of bark and boughs, of linen woven and stretched, of grass and straw, of boards and shingles, of stones and tiles. At last, we know not what it is to live in the open air, and our lives are domestic in more senses than we think. From the hearth to the field is a great distance. It would be well perhaps if we were to spend more of our days and nights without any obstruction between us and the celestial bodies, if the poet did not speak so much from under a roof, or the saint dwell there so long. Birds do not sing in caves, nor do doves cherish their innocence in dovecots.[15]

Since the democratic pedagogue is most interested in how Thoreau views the ideal citizen, the theoretical question of "citizen function" emerges. Rhetorically, Thoreau is able to distill the

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[14]Ibid., 48.

[15]Thoreau (1986), 71.

necessary activities into the simple task of "maintaining vital heat." Significantly, these "necessary activities" were focused upon spiritual and intellectual pursuits, that is, maintaining the vital heat of the human soul, antipathetic toward any capitalist, or as he saw them, materialist ends. But in this simple phrase can be found the basis of Thoreau's Transcendentalist philosophy; and indeed the first function of the "shining example" he is rhetorically building. He does not, despite the frequent appropriation of *Civil Disobedience* by politically aversive groups, preach ideological; but instead he forms rhetorically consistent points from which to argue for a social perspective. Emerson makes explicit this distinction in attitude between the materialist and idealist.

> As thinkers, mankind have ever divided into two sects, Materialists and Idealists; the first class founding on experience, the second on consciousness; the first class beginning to think from the data of the senses, the second class perceive that the senses are not final, and say, The senses give us representations of things, but what are the things themselves, they cannot tell. The materialist insists on facts, on history, on the force of circumstances and the animal wants of man; the idealist on the power of Thought and of Will, on inspiration, on miracle, on individual culture.[16]

To Thoreau, this power "of Thought and of Will" was indeed paramount, and thus any maintenance of vital heat can only occur from freeing the mind of the mundanities of civilized existence, quite similar to the Platonic contemplation of forms on the phenomenal plane. Another important point of concern is in Thoreau's efforts to alert his readers against endowing capitalism or civilization with an agency of their own. Our freedoms as individuals are encroached upon only if we allow it. The fact that the threats of socialization or capitalism have no intentionality means that Thoreau's ideal is ultimately plausible. Thoreau's iconoclastic solitude remains consistent with the democratic ideals of privacy and informed deliberation.

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[16]Emerson (1982), 239.

A reader senses in Thoreau not so much a wish to return to the days when men were largely uncivilized, but rather a recognition and appreciation of the innocent potential of mind before the social-habituation process begins it's formidably complete task. This element of primal priority contributes to our understanding of Thoreau's meaning of the term "vital." For many philosophers of human nature, "vital," beyond physical necessity, was characteristic of exclusivity and function. Many thinkers, including Plato and back even to Presocratic times, have connected this exclusivity with divinity, with implications for contemplation, but not action. This divine connection is present in Thoreau's Transcendentalism as well. Significantly however, the connection occurs when the individual can recognize and reflect upon their own motivational value system, and then act in accordance with that impulse. The greatest threat to this course of action, for Thoreau, is the imposition on society of government regulation. Compellingly, his shining example exists as a response to this condition of perceived over-regulation, and becomes inapplicable were the threat removed. Thus the "vitality" is contained in the address of this imposition, in the context of the actions done in civil disobedience.

> Action from principle, the perception and performance of the right, changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with anything which was. It not only divides states and churches, it divides families; aye, it divides the individual, separating the diabolical in him from the divine.[17]

Additionally, the social context of a competitive, capitalist society lends commodity value to the actions of men, and thus minimizes any effort to express the insight that might come from routine experience. Thoreau alludes to this point even as he laments the rapid advance of technology. He questions the necessity of the transcontinental telegraph when men have nothing

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[17]Thoreau (1986), 395.

important to communicate; "as if the main object were to talk fast," he scolds, "and not to talk sensibly."[18] Our ability to communicate is our salvation because we are able to express our insight, therefore the arts and skills of expression are naturally primary to our capacity to expand the forum for public discourse. Thoreau also echoes the ancient Roman educator Quintillion and his description of the good citizen as *vir bonus*, the good man speaking well. If they want a society of good citizens, then individuals have the duty to be vocal and active citizens, says Thoreau, because without the action of these individuals, the institution of government will impose itself upon the people.

> In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well. Such command no more respect that men of straw or a lump of dirt. They have the same sort of worth only as horses and dogs. Yet such as these even are commonly esteemed good citizens.[19]

Thoreau is clearly telling us that productive democratic citizenship is more than capitalistic prowess, especially if the society is to maintain some degree of human integrity. A psychological parallel to Thoreau's civic perspective can be drawn to Aristotle's *Ethics*. In that work, Aristotle developed his theory of human nature as existing on three levels: the organic or instinctual level, the appetitive, covetous level, and the contemplative, or rational level. Just as Aristotle would have his students believe that by virtue of the exclusive capacity of human beings to develop rational sense, that rationality becomes what makes an individual ultimately human; so Thoreau would teach us that by virtue of the human capacity to conceive of more than the merely

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[18]Thoreau (1986), 95.

[19]Thoreau (1986), 388.

capitalistic duties of citizenship, that the status of "citizen" must be reserved for the individual who is in command of a rational, critical public perspective and is able to contribute that perspective in the forum of public affairs, thus affirming active expression as the central action of the virtuous citizen. The Transcendentalists generally would place the hypothetical achievement of "spiritual wholeness" at the pinnacle of human success; for Thoreau, part of this was expressing an informed position as compelled by the office of "citizen."

> But, to speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not at once no government, but *at once* a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it.[20]

Thoreau might well concede that capitalistic success may be a consequence of the quest for civic success he advocates, but would stress that material wealth can never be considered a success in itself. Indeed, individuals can only achieve the status of "citizen" through active participation and expression.

It is not difficult for any reader of Thoreau to point to the dramatic inconsistencies between his philosophy and the events of his life, and infer that the ideology he presents as impractical. His philosophy, however, retains its romantic draw, its idealistic innocence affected further by his literary style and rhetorical skill. Perhaps even those who would question the credibility of one who could not subscribe to his own written tenets might also consider the eulogistic admiration expressed by his friend Emerson;

> He could find his path in the woods at night, he said, better by his feet than his eyes. He could estimate the measure of a tree very well by his eye; he could estimate the weight of a calf or a pig, like a dealer. From a box containing a bushel or more loose pencils, he could take up with his hands fast enough just a dozen

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[20]Thoreau (1986), 386.

> pencils at every grasp. He was a good swimmer, runner, skater, boatman, and would probably outwalk most countrymen in a day's journey. And the relation of body to mind was still finer than we have indicated.[21]

We, as readers populating the latest incarnation of the same democratic experiment, owe it not to Thoreau, but to the continued development of our society, to read and understand the Transcendentalism of Thoreau; because of the valid and compelling rhetorical criticisms of inertial institutions that remain timelessly applicable. Some might argue that we gain a sense of how difficult it is to resist social conformity when we consider that Thoreau himself was unable to live consistently how he advocated. His failure presents us with the question of undertaking the moral and spiritual burden of democratic citizenship. I would say that this is exactly the question which must be presented to students in our democracy today. In his philosophy, even if not his life, we find a basis for personal peace within the competitive capitalist society that is modern democracy. As educators, we must recognize the institutional importance of this iconoclastic perspective, and its continuing theoretical validity.

That Thoreau was unable to separate himself and his thoughts from his social context is significant. Though he insisted that "Public opinion is a weak tyrant compared with our own private opinion. What a man thinks of himself, that is which determines, or rather indicates, his fate."[22] Still his staunch individualistic outlook was ultimately deeply affected by his perspective on communal values, most notably slavery. As Meyer writes, "His social conscience impinged on his consciousness, even though he believed that his duty was not to eradicate social evils but to

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[21]Emerson (1982), 400.

[22]Thoreau (1986), 50.

live his life independently of the 'trivial' 19th century."[23] We now must celebrate the consistent rhetorical voice he used to express his perspective. As the saying goes, "We have seen the enemy, and it is us;" for Thoreau, the battle against that enemy was waged over a lifetime.

[23]Meyer (1986), 29.

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